

A Renaissance of Theological Aesthetics

Hans Urs von Balthasar's reading of Nicholas of Cusa

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In the twentieth century, the ideas of Nicholas of Cusa have been made popular again by philosophers like Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg¹. Very few theologians have paid serious attention to the ideas of Cusanus. Of course, Rudolf Haubst has written treatises on some theological topics in Cusanus' work². His findings did not get a theological reception though. Karl Jaspers' introduction has been much more important in that respect³. For the main part, theologians have been dependent on philosophical approaches to the Renaissance thinker. However, the central role he plays in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics has yet, with the notable exception of Louis Dupré, failed to influence both philosophers and theologians⁴. In this article, I will show the importance of the philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa for Balthasar's theological aesthetics⁵. I will then describe Cusanus' key position in Balthasar's account of the history of metaphysics and discuss Cusanus' aesthetics within the context of the philosophy of his time. Finally, I will emphasise the influence of his aesthetics on Balthasar's theology,

¹E. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, Erster Band, Darmstadt 1994 (1922³), 21-61; H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1988², 558-638.

²His essays are collected in: R. Haubst, *Streifzüge in die cusanische Theologie*, München 1991.

³K. Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus*, München 1987 (1964).

⁴H.U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik, Band III,1: Im Raum der Metaphysik*, Einsiedeln 1965 (from now on *Herrlichkeit*), 552-592. Balthasar has influenced the work of L. Dupré, *Passage to modernity. An essay in the hermeneutics of nature and culture*, New Haven 1993.

⁵Cfr. H.U. von Balthasar, Warum wir Nikolaus Cusanus brauchen, in: *Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* 60, [Beilage Christliche Kultur 28], Nr. 29, 14 August 1964.

philosophically and theologically.

1 Balthasar's idea of the history of metaphysics: before and after Cusanus

Balthasar's treatise on Cusanus is an attempt to determine his philosophy as a re-assimilation and completion of classical philosophy. At the same time, it is a radical renewal of classical thought, by which Cusanus, according to Balthasar, has set the tone for modern philosophy. Therefore, Balthasar's systematic analysis of Cusanus' metaphysics must be understood in his account of the historical context of philosophical developments before and after Cusanus.

As Balthasar is working on the first volumes of *Herrlichkeit*, he writes a small book dedicated to, what he calls a mysticism of love⁶. In it, he describes the love of God as the light of the world. Because of the theme of light, but also because of themes like 'perception of love' and 'love as revelation', he calls *Glaubhaft* an outline of his main work on aesthetics. His aesthetics does not deal with the disinterested contemplation (*Interesselosigkeit*) of Christian philosophy, but with the perception of, and the enrapturement by the glory of God. As such, it is comparable to Scheler's personalist phenomenology, combined with a theology of sainthood. The attitude of the saints, which he will come to regard as the metaphysics of holy reason in *Herrlichkeit*, and which is described there as a receptivity to eternity, has been lost in modern philosophy, according to Balthasar.

In *Glaubhaft*, Balthasar describes the classical and modern periods as the age of the cosmological reduction and anthropological reduction respectively, and goes on to claim that God's everlasting love cannot be thought of from either perspective alone⁷. God's love can only be thought of as the coherence of eternity and individuality. Balthasar argues that philosophy should never have traded its cosmological starting points for mere anthropological starting points. According to him, it should have attempted to imagine the

⁶H.U. von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, Einsiedeln 1963.

⁷Balthasar does not strictly distinguish between a cosmological and an anthropological period, but the period before the Renaissance is generally classified by him as 'cosmological' and the period after the Renaissance 'anthropological'. However, authors such as Boehme, Hegel and Schelling are classed by him as part of the cosmological reduction as well.

union of the classical and the modern, a union leading to the heart of western thought.

1.1 Metaphysical developments before Cusanus

Cusanus' philosophy reincorporates the original forms of thought as they were articulated in Greek philosophy, according to Balthasar. The days of Scholasticism are over, and Balthasar remains highly critical of this period. Cusanus and Balthasar would both agree that there could be no such thing as a *scientific* theology, for true theology cannot be captured in books or arguments. There can be no scientific doctrine of God *next to* a mystical doctrine of God. This is why, according to Balthasar, two types of metaphysics can be distinguished in the history of mythology, philosophy and religion toward the end of the Middle Ages: the metaphysics of saints and the metaphysics of fools. Both types signify a return to the metaphysical questions of the classical world, in which the ontological problem of unity and diversity is developed⁸. However, both types of metaphysics do not simply mean a restoration of classical thought. They are an attempt to reflect upon the religious and mythical foundation of the Christian unity of late mediaeval culture. According to Balthasar, they should be seen as a follow-up of Neoplatonism, a philosophical movement he has both criticised and adopted in his theology⁹.

Balthasar distinguishes the following types of metaphysics in the late Middle Ages, asserting their influence far into the modern age. First, he distinguishes the metaphysics of the saints, also called metaphysics of holy reason. This type of metaphysics can be found especially in the thought of Eckhart, Tauler and Ruusbroec, which

⁸*Herrlichkeit III,1*, 371-551.

⁹"Der packende protestantische Ernst, der sich gern durch abfällige Äußerungen über den "ästhetischen" Unernst im katholischen Raum zu decken vermag und gewiß überall dort recht hat, wo biblische Betrachtung unvermerkt in "neuplatonische" ästhetische Kontemplation *absinkt*, wird doch seinerseits stets an die Gottherrlichkeit verwiesen werden müssen, von der die objektive Offenbarung voll ist." Balthasar adds a note to the word 'absinkt': "Ich mußte darauf gefaßt sein, ehe man mich auch nur ausreden ließ, zum alten neuplatonischen Eisen geworfen zu werden." *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 17-18. Balthasar is responding to a book review by H.E. Bahr - himself an author on theological aesthetics - who calls *Herrlichkeit* a return to the period before Thomas (Balthasar adds an exclamation mark when he quotes this line) and at the same time a renewed Neoplatonic-Christian mysticism. Balthasar himself is the cause of this confusion, by including, among others, Platonists in the origins of western thought and with this of the Christian theology of revelation. *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 958-964.

Balthasar characterises by *indifferentia*. It is mainly developed by the mystics in the period between Thomas and the Renaissance and re-emphasises the themes of the Greek tragedies. The core idea is that being human means 'suffering'. This should be understood as the true characteristic of finitude and therefore as a physical, but above all a spiritual feature. The person, who suffers, can do nothing but to resign herself to her being and fate. The theme of 'resignation' has often been forgotten in Christian philosophy, according to Balthasar, because Christian thought is a continuation of classical philosophy, which has forgotten to digest the themes of the Greek tragedies. This is why Christendom does not use the tragic resignation, but the 'way' of Christ for interpreting and undergoing suffering. However, undergoing suffering has always been interpreted in a metaphysical sense as well, as a deliverance of the finite beings into an infinite being, as exaltation from being-image to being-without-image, as being accepted into the world of the eternal light. Following Thomas, the theme of resignation gained a different, more active meaning, viz. that of the intellectual openness of the *intellectus agens*. According to Balthasar, Eckhart has interpreted this intellectual openness of humans to God as an intellectual 'freedom' - not the freedom of the will - and has cleared the way for the dangers of modernity, in which the freedom of people is seen as separate from the freedom of God¹⁰. This modern position means the end of the metaphysics of the saints, which advocates the selfless vision of the divine glory and therefore always sees its own freedom within the framework of divine freedom.

Second, he distinguishes the metaphysics of foolish reason, which he characterises by *Geworfenheit*. This metaphysics has mainly been developed further in the works of Cervantes, Shakespeare and Dostoevski and the paintings of Rouault. If the world of classical tragedy can be characterised by melancholy, the world of the fool certainly cannot be characterised in the same way. Saints experience a chasm between finitude and infinity or use contemplation to ascend into the intangible infinite light. In literature, the difference between God and humans often only finds its expression in simple man, the fool or the clown. Quite often, saints and heroes are accompanied by these fools. Furthermore, saints and heroes show a great resemblance to the fools, in the forms of a contemplation that

¹⁰ *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 407-491, esp. 407-410.

sometimes leads to madness, a temporary experience of hell, or in the often abnormal gestures and rituals that have to be performed to bridge the chasm with eternity¹¹.

The passivity of both types of metaphysics reaches its completion with Ignatius of Loyola, according to Balthasar. Ignatius considered the passivity and the spontaneity of the human intellect to be one. Those that deny the activity and the spontaneity of the human mind in the light of the divine revelation, or even dismiss it as mere foolery, will quickly identify the analogy of Creator and creature with the contradiction of the sinful and apostate human and the delivering and atoning God. Both the metaphysics of the saints and the metaphysics of the fools have been guilty of searching for divine glory in the world in the form of something unmediated and supernatural. Later, these two forms are joined by a third form of metaphysics which, like the other two, is too quick in institutionalising the chasm between God and humans (this should have been the subject of the third part of *Herrlichkeit* III,2, which was never published), and also has its foundation in pre-scholastic philosophy: The metaphysics of the reformers, characterised by being ‘unmediated’.

1.2 Metaphysical developments after Cusanus

Balthasar proposes that the modern age - fifteenth century Humanism, sixteenth century Renaissance, seventeenth century Baroque, and eighteenth century Enlightenment to nineteenth century German Idealism - has three main themes which are addressed in three different metaphysical variants, again finding their origin in classical thought, but leading to a loss of divine glory. First, there is the continuing mediation of classical thought (Origen, Augustine, Boëthius, Eriugena, Dante). This Neoplatonic line in the history of philosophy has always related best to Christian thought, according to Balthasar, because it regards the world as revelation, and thereby questions the division between the world and the cosmos. Christ, being the divine or cosmic revelation, would be the answer to the question for the relation of the world and the cosmos. However, the modern age does not return to this ‘naive classical relation to the

¹¹ *Herrlichkeit* III,1, 492-551, esp. 492-496.

divine', as he calls it, and therefore a new speculative doctrine of God has been developed.

The second theme of modernity is a new speculative doctrine of God. The new doctrine of God, developed by Plotinus and subsequently reinterpreted in a Christian way by Augustine, assumes a direct experience between the finite and the infinite self. Not until Eckhart, does this experience gain its full meaning of diffidence and veneration by means of the direct vision of God, which is seen as the mystagogical way. Balthasar argues that Eckhart could not have foreseen that the combination of both themes - cosmos/world and the inward witnessing of God - would lead to the loss of divine glory.

Thirdly, Balthasar distinguishes the modern idea of evolution (Hegel, Feuerbach). Both the abovementioned themes have led to the idea of evolution or progress. According to Balthasar, the concept of the world is developed within the space of the relation of the finite and the infinite self, as a result of which the sovereignty of God and His glory are injured. What is left, is the idea of the absolute identity of the self and the human search for themselves.

Balthasar's account of the history of metaphysics seems to be a rather negative one. According to him, every theme and development in modernity he describes have led to a loss of divine glory (*Herrlichkeitsvergessenheit*). However, these developments have their origin in classical thought. Balthasar's criticism of philosophical metaphysics therefore is not cynically advocating a return to premodern times. According to him, the history of metaphysics is not a history of radical caesuras, but of continuity (with the possible exception of Nominalism), interpreted by him as a history of catholicity. In his magnum opus *Herrlichkeit*, his criticisms are directed towards the application of philosophical concepts to theological aesthetics. In modernity, philosophy and theology have become separate disciplines. A theological aesthetics, based on what he calls 'innerwordly' concepts, will confuse natural or artificial beauty with divine glory. According to Balthasar, Nicholas of Cusa has been the last philosopher who was able to maintain the coincidence of a cosmological and anthropological worldview. Especially in his aesthetics, there was no radical opposition between the divine Creator and the artist. Yet, Cusanus established a modern change of roles in the interplay of the human and the divine.

2 A reconstruction of Cusanus' aesthetics

Originally from Kues in Germany, Cusanus stayed at Deventer, in the Netherlands, with the Brethren of the Common Life, in his early years. Later in his life, he spent a considerable amount of time in Italy as a church diplomat. This is where he must have become acquainted with the Italian Renaissance. However, Nicholas preferred 'mediaeval' gothic music and painting from the Low Countries, such as the music of Ockegem and paintings by Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memlinc. I will now present a short outline of Cusanus' aesthetics. I then evaluate the importance of his aesthetics for Balthasar¹².

General histories of aesthetics do not usually mention Cusanus. Some do mention him merely to mark the beginning of Renaissance philosophy. His contemporary Marsilio Ficino is much more important for the history of aesthetics. Nicholas has not devoted a single work exclusively to art or the concept of beauty. However, the works of a philosopher like Cusanus, influenced by Neoplatonism, contain many passages that deal with form, light, harmony or proportion. Edgar De Bruyne thought that Cusanus' allusions to beauty and art lack originality. According to DeBruyne, Cusanus' ideas are interesting only when they are seen in the framework of his entire philosophical system¹³. Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz calls Cusanus' aesthetics a return to Platonism, although he emphasises that Cusanus lends little weight to the platonic-idealistic starting points of his aesthetics. He seems to be more interested in the

¹²I have used the following edition of the translation of the works of Cusanus: *Nikolaus von Kues, Philosophisch Theologische Schriften* (from now on *PTS*), [3 Bde., lat.—dt. Studien- und Jubiläumausgabe, hg. und eingef. v. L. Gabriel. übersetzt und kommentiert von D. und W. Dupré], Freiburg 1964-67; For Cusanus' biography, E. Meuthen, *Nikolaus von Kues. Skizze einer Biographie*, Münster 1964. Other works on Cusanus: M. Alvarez-Gomez, *Die verborgene Gegenwart des Unendlichen bei Nikolaus von Kues*, München 1968; W. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz. Zum Prinzip cusanischen Denkens*, Opladen 1977; K. Flasch, *Die Metaphysik des Einen bei Nikolaus von Kues. Problemgeschichtliche Stellung und systematische Bedeutung*, [Studien zur Problemgeschichte der antiken und mittelalterlichen Philosophie VII], Leiden 1973; R. Haubst, *Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues*, Freiburg 1956; R. Haubst, *Das Bild des Einen und Dreieinen Gottes in der Welt nach Nikolaus von Kues*, Trier 1952; G. Schneider, *Gott - Das Nichtandere. Untersuchungen zum metaphysischen Grunde bei Nikolaus von Kues*, 1970; Th. van Velthoven, *Gottesschau und menschliche Kreativität. Studien zur Erkenntnislehre des Nikolaus von Kues*, Leiden 1977; K.H. Volkmann-Schluck, *Nicolaus Cusanus. Die Philosophie im Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a.M. 1957.

¹³E. De Bruyne, *Geschiedenis van de aesthetica. De Renaissance*, Antwerpen 1951, 227-229.

activity of the human mind¹⁴.

According to Cusanus, the function of art is to arrange and assemble substances (*congregat omnia*) to give multiplicity and diversity unity and form (*unitas in pluritate*)¹⁵. This method of working is a creative act. The artist can create a work that does not exist in nature, for example, when he creates a casket or a spoon from a tree that was created by nature¹⁶. The world in which people live has therefore been created by both God and humans. There is nothing in this world, which is exclusively natural or artificial. Cusanus usually uses the artisan as an example of the artist. The work of the painter still has its example in nature, but the artisan's work finds its example in the human mind. The spoon cannot be found in natural reality. In Cusanus' days of course, the visual arts produced images and representations of natural reality. Cusanus' choice of the artisan is not unique in the history of aesthetics¹⁷. However, his interpretation of the artisan's work, capable of creating something new that expresses the creative power of the human mind, is original. In this respect, Cusanus' aesthetics does differ from the mediaeval conception of art as pure productivity and technical skill, although he does not have a modern conception of art as a separate discipline.

The creative process of the artist does not start with the creation of a work of art, but with the vision. Vision is the beginning of all art. Creation is only a result of this vision. This point of view is what makes Cusanus so interesting for the beginning of modern philosophy. Art is not just the work of hands, but also the work of the human mind. 'Vision' should not be interpreted as a mere sensory act, but also as a mental act. Because vision precedes art here, Cusanus can be said to have caused a Copernican turn *avant la lettre*. Although, in the philosophy of Cusanus, human knowledge is aimed at objects, the mind is the measure of all things in art. The work of art completely conforms to the human mind.

The human mind is not capable of creating the absolute pro-

¹⁴W. Tatarkiewicz, *Geschichte der Ästhetik. III: Die Ästhetik der Neuzeit; Von Petrarca bis Vico*, Basel 1987, 81-86, 82.

¹⁵Cusanus also uses both concepts in his philosophy of religion, especially in his philosophy of religious freedom in *De pace fidei*, PTS III, 707-796.

¹⁶*Idiota de mente*, PTS III, 490v.

¹⁷Similar interpretations of the artisan as an artist can already be found in the works of Aristotle. W. Tatarkiewicz, *Geschichte der Ästhetik. III*, 82-84.

portion, which is the highest norm for a work of art in platonic philosophy. According to Cusanus, the mind is only capable of forming conjectures: assumptions or assessments. The proportions of a work of art are grounded in comparisons performed by the mind and are therefore always relative. The form one creates out of substance is only likeness and image (*similitudo et imago*). This is what, to Balthasar, is valuable in the works of Cusanus.

3 Human vision as analogy: A philosophical appraisal

“Sein (Cusanus) Entwurf einer Philosophie zwischen Geist und Gott kann, braucht aber nicht transzendental im modernen Sinn ausgewertet zu werden. In der antiken Sicht (als Seinsphilosophie) wie in der modernen Sicht (als Philosophie des Geistes und der Freiheit) gilt Nikolaus’ Denkanstrengung immerfort dem Vollzug der analogia entis”¹⁸.

According to Balthasar, Cusanus is the starting point for a philosophy of mind based on classic thought. The *analogia entis*, which according to him formally started by Plotinus, is completed by Cusanus introducing the creativity of the human mind. *Analogia entis* is the expression of the first philosophical act, Balthasar argues. He uses Cusanus’ language: seeing the *complicatio* in the *explicatio*. “Gott ist alles *in* Allem, weil er uneinholbar alles *über* Allem ist.” A human being always has a one-sided vision of the One expanded in all and at the same time, he sees that the One can never be fully expanded. In this sense, one sees the invisible in the visible. There can only be a world next to a God who is already everything, if and only if God is thought of as being above everything. This simultaneity can only be grasped in an imperfect way, in the form of a longing.

Cusanus adds such a metaphysics of the *desiderium* to a metaphysics of *Gelassenheit* and a metaphysics of *Geworfenheit*. As a philosopher, he calls himself *idiotus*: philosophy is the deepening and exploration of the understanding that we know nothing. The more we realise this, the more we start longing. After all, we cannot long for the longing to stop. The longing for God is fed by the understanding that He is the Invisible, and the more we realise this,

¹⁸ *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 568-9.

the more we know God by not knowing (*docta ignorantia*) and not seeing Him.

3.1 Cusanus and the analogy of being

According to Balthasar, Cusanus is the last pre-reformation philosopher who reflects upon the paradoxes of the *analogia entis*. His concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* does not mean the coexistence or combination of *contradictions*, but rather the coincidence of *opposites*. Incarnation, for example, is the coincidence of God and creation; the church is the coincidence of historicity and universality; faith is the coincidence of seeing the invisible and visualising this vision, etc. The idea of coincidence is an *intellectus fidei*. For both Balthasar and Cusanus, the *intellectus* is always an Anselmian *fides*, a search within faith towards faith.

Balthasar does have some questions for Cusanus' philosophy, however. Does Cusanus neglect the infinite difference between God and humans? Does his explanation of the *analogia entis* mean a dissolving of the reception of divine glory into a totalitarian, cosmological scheme? If so, how could this do justice to the cross, hell and resurrection? Balthasar argues that despite these dangers in Cusanus' philosophy, Nicholas does bring cosmos and gospel together in a way unique to the modern age. This is why Cusanus, according to Balthasar, is not just the knot between the old and the new age. His philosophy is also the concentration of all the images of God that preceded him in confrontation with the modern idea of the human mind. Cusanus' God is at the same time the One (Plotinus), the Shining One (Homer), the Dark One (Sophocles), the Longing (Virgil) and the biblical God. For Plotinus, Proclus and Eriugena, the world is the appearance of the non-appearing God. Eckhart has interpreted God's non-appearance in a Christian way as His absolute freedom. Cusanus has continued the theme of the divine freedom, e.g. in the themes of Love and the Bride.

3.2 Glory and analogy

The appearance of the divine glory in the world is developed on two analogous levels by Cusanus. First, on a trinitarian level: The relation between the divine Love and the human mind appears in

the glory between Father and Son. ‘Glory’ in this case is the mutual giving and receiving of love. Second, on an innerworldly level: The God-world relation in Christ is present in the mystery of the Spirit in the Church. Trinitarian glory appears in the church because of the working of the Spirit in the human mind. The analogy of the trinitarian relation and the innerworldly relation between God and humans is already founded in the philosophical works of Cusanus. I will now present this philosophical foundation based on its treatment by Balthasar.

Cusanus describes the infinite forming principle of all forms in the world as the Primal Image, which appears in the human mind as the truth of every image, as measure (harmony, proportion, number) and foundation. This Primal Image is an infinite living Person - for it appears to the human mind as a spirit - not just as a worldly being - that thinks and speaks. The sensory world can therefore be represented as a book or a text that can be read, and that contains the words God has spoken to the world through his Son. His Word is heard in every sound.

Each creature should be understood as an intention, a resolve to be understood as divine self-communication. People, who see themselves as a creature and the world as creation, understand themselves and the world they live in as divine self-communication. Because of this Cusan image, Balthasar finds a double aesthetical dimension in the works of Cusanus. Firstly, a material or horizontal aesthetics that is characterised by *consonantia*: All sounds in the world are only heard in imitation of each other, belonging together like in a melody in which every note has its place, a simultaneous preceding and proceeding. The world could not be understood as world if the different tones within the melody, the different words, would not be heard in a sentence or meaning¹⁹. Secondly, a formal or vertical aesthetics that is characterised by *claritas* and *resplendentia*: The things in the world could not be seen if there was no light that illuminated them. Things get that clarity from the reflection of something else which is not a thing itself, but a light, which can only be seen indirectly however invisibly via an object in the world.

¹⁹Here, the doctrine of the *docta ignorantia* resounds: All knowledge is only knowledge because of a preceding knowledge. All new knowledge can only come into existence because of the application of a measure, formed by what we already know.

Balthasar claims that Cusanus attributes a transcendental beauty to a person simultaneously in the form of a *having* (in a spiritual way) and in the form of *being* (as being-spirit) based on the cohesion between the horizontal and the vertical aesthetics. According to Cusanus, the human mind *has* the ability to behold the world as the appearance of the non-appearing God (and with it beholding God Himself) and as such, as spirit, a person *is* a created image of the divine primal beauty. Seeing oneself as the image of God, this person understands his or her seeing of God in the world as an image of how God sees people and everything else in the world. This intellectual vision consequently, is the image of God. The human mind only becomes beautiful when it is itself, i.e. when it has a mental self-awareness of itself as beautiful. A person sees the world and him or herself as an image. With this, he or she sees the Creator of the image, after which follows the insight that only the act of seeing itself, makes a person into an image. Seeing God is seeing the divine glory in worldly beauty, which also includes people.

Knowledge of worldly beauty is no guarantee for knowledge of the divine glory. On the contrary, glory can only be seen if the divine light breaks through in the world. Only then, one realises that, although glory cannot be defined conceptually, it can be comprehended in an incomprehensible way. This comprehension only exists in the coincidence of the descend of identity into non-identity and the ascent of non-identity into identity. For Cusanus, analogy is *evocat idem nonidem in idem*²⁰. In other words, faith alone, and not one's own conceptual capabilities, enables one to become *speculator majestatis*, but the human mind realises this, while the mind already has faith when it does so.

3.3 Analogy as negative theology

How does the horizontal aesthetics in the world, expressing itself in proportion and number (*analogia proportionalitatis*), relate to the vertical aesthetics that expresses itself in terms of light (*analogia attributionis*)? Between God and the created world, we find the created spirit which, just like the Creator, is also the light and

²⁰W. Schulze, *Zahl, Proportion, Analogie. Eine Untersuchung zur Metaphysik und Wissenschaftshaltung des Nikolaus von Kues*, [Buchreihe der Cusanusgesellschaft, Bd. VII, Hrsg. von R. Haubst, E. Meuthen und J. Stallmach], Münster 1978, 232-242.

principle of all things. According to Cusanus, the spirit is a divinenummer, which can express the relation between God and the world. The inadequacy of that expression corresponds to the inadequate comprehension of the infinite spirit. Even the inadequacy of mental expression constitutes a similarity to the difference between the finite and the infinite spirit. This is a similarity in the face of an ever-greater dissimilarity. Like the infinite spirit, the human mind has the infinite possibility to contemplate, determine and name the things in the world. This infinite possibility is actualised in a finite way, however. In as far as the world is beheld by the human mind, it becomes intelligible that it is seen by the infinite Spirit and that this seeing of the Spirit constitutes the human freedom of imagination²¹.

This is precisely the paradox that expresses the analogy of being, according to Balthasar: God is everything, and yet the world exists, not in any way altering the fact that God is everything. God is all in all, yet he does not coincide with the world, He does not mix with it, even though He is completely immanent to it. Because God is all in all the unfolded particularities, in a forever folded, but total way²². Some Cusanus scholars deny the importance of the *analogia entis* in his philosophy. Their main argument is that Cusanus himself never used the term ‘analogy’. He did use the word ‘*proportio*’ however, e.g. in *finiti ad infinitum proportio non est*. Especially in that last statement, Cusanus seems to deny the analogy of the infinite and the finite. Others argue that Cusanus’ metaphysics is a metaphysics of unity instead of difference, in which there would be no room for analogy. Moreover, all inner-worldly characteristics ascribed to God should be regarded in a metaphorical sense only²³.

Balthasar however, also interprets Cusanus’ doctrine of the Non-Other analogously. The beings in the world relate to other things as being different. God can never be such an opposite, for He

²¹“Apparuisti mihi Domine aliquando ut invisibilis ab omni creatura, quia es Deus absconditus infinitus. Infinitas autem est incomprehensibilis omni modo comprehendi. Apparui deinde mihi, ut ab omnibus visibilis, quia in tantum res est, in quantum tu eam vides. Et ipsa non esset actu nisi te videret. Visio enim praestat esse, quia est essentia tua. Sic Deus meus es invisibilis pariter et visibilis. Invisibilis es uti tu es, visibilis es uti creatura est, quae in tantum est, in quantum te videt.” *De visione Dei XII, PTS III*, 142.

²²*Herrlichkeit III,1*, 571.

²³R. Haubst, Nikolaus von Kues und die analogia entis, in: *Streifzüge in die cusanische Theologie*, [Buchreihe der Cusanusgesellschaft, Sonderbeitrag zur Theologie des Cusanus, Hrsg. von R. Haubst, E. Meuthen und J. Stallmach], Münster 1991, 232-242.

is never just a particular being, according to Cusanus. On the contrary, he is not different, the Non-Other, because beings are no more than what they are, and because we keep noticing the other in the world, which supposes the Non-Other. How else would we be able to imagine the other? Both moments of non-otherness, of the things in the world itself (identity) and of the possibility to think of things in such a way (the idea of *Non-Aliud*), reflect two moments in Cusanus' aesthetics. The identity of the world is the *consonantia* of the material or horizontal aesthetics. The idea of *Non-Aliud* is the *claritas* and *resplendentia* of the formal or vertical aesthetics, which can be read from things as the appearance of the Non-Appearing.

According to Cusanus, *coincidentia oppositorum* can only be understood as convergence (non-otherness). This convergence or analogy is expressed by Cusanus as reduplication: *omne ens non entiter, essentia essentiarum*, etc. This is how he avoids taking a pantheistic stance. The analogy of being does not just apply to all beings in the world, it also applies to all (metaphysical) knowledge: Only in the idea of God, things can get their exactness.

4 Seeing the present God: A theological critique

The problems Cusanus exposed in his philosophical epistemology are solved theologically in *De visione Dei*, *De Possest* and *De apice theoriae*. However, according to Balthasar, these theological texts still have a philosophical style. They are mostly influenced by the philosophy of Plotinus and Proclus. Plotinus regarded the contingency of finitude as the worldly pendant of absolute freedom. Aesthetically, finitude could then be understood as the unselfish radiation of the Good. According to Balthasar, Cusanus could interpret this unselfish act in the light of the Person and the Love of God as Creator and revelation, without any hesitation. The consequence however, would be that he had to carefully fit his philosophical elaboration of the analogy of being into Christian doctrine, especially into the doctrine of God.

4.1 Analogy as positive theology

Cusanus interprets God's incomprehensibility in negative theology within the framework of an even greater incomprehensibility of the divine love²⁴. God's Love reveals itself to human beings, because God wants it, even though it is not necessary. Subsequently, human beings are free to comply with this divine free will. Balthasar argues that this conquers the position of negative theology of classical thought²⁵. In Christian theology, God's negative incomprehensibility is transformed into a positive incomprehensibility. The analogy of love shows that the relation to God is not mere determinism, but also an act of free will of human beings. This relation to God, which Augustine once described as "*Videntem videre*", is described by Cusanus in *De visione Dei* (1453) by means of the famous example of a portrait that keeps looking at the beholder²⁶. An insight into God's love is provided by means of the metaphor of vision.

In *De visione Dei*, Cusanus attempts to introduce the monks of Tegernsee to mystical theology. He will try to explain the inaccessible light of God, which transcends any sensory, rational and intellectual comprehension, however in terms within their intellectual grasp. He does this by means of the self-portrait of Rogier van der Weyden, which has been painted in such a way that the portrayed appears to be able to look at everything and everyone. Cusanus calls this: 'the image of God'²⁷. The gaze of the person in the portrait moves to a position in such a way that it also moves to all other positions simultaneously. It looks as if it moves, without moving itself, as if it sees everything at the same time. Therefore, it is an image of God.

Balthasar calls the idea that is illustrated in the example of the

²⁴"Et haec est gaudiosissima comprehensio amantis, quando incomprehensibilem amabilitatem amati comprehendit. Nequaquam enim tantum gauderet se amare secundum aliquod comprehensibile amatum, sicut quando sibi constat amat amabilitatem esse penitus immensurabilem, infinibilem, interminabilem ac incomprehensibilem. Haec est gaudiosissima incomprehensibilitatis comprehensibilitas." *Idiota de sapientia 1, PTS III*, 432.

²⁵For the opposite position, see Th. P. Tighe, *A neglected feature of Neoplatonic metaphysics*, in: P.J. Casarella and G.P. Schnier, s.j., *Christian spirituality and the culture of modernity. The thought of Louis Dupré*, Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1998, 27-49.

²⁶*PTS III*, 93-219. Especially in the *praefatio* and chapters I to III. See also 3.4.

²⁷In his text, Cusanus refers to a large panel on which Rogier Van der Weyden has painted himself among a large group of people. He is the only one looking at the beholder. This panel used to hang in the city hall of Brussels, but it no longer survives. A Gobelin copy of the panel can be found in the Bern museum. Cusanus sent the brothers of Tegernsee a similar portrait.

gaze ‘biblical’, although he argues that Cusanus has worked it out in a Plotinian way, in the form of the reduplications: God is the face of all faces, the vision of all visions, etc. However, the idea is also biblical, because the vision of God is not just determined as a being, but also as Love and Compassion²⁸. Cusanus transforms the analogy of being into an analogy of freedom and love. According to Balthasar, this was not the case in Eckhart’s theology, which he criticises for identifying being and God. In Cusanus’ theology, the relation to God is borne by the free and simultaneous choice of both God and humans²⁹. Cusanus places this biblical idea into the Plotinian scheme quite stubbornly, according to Balthasar.

A person’s vision of God is contained in God’s vision of the person. Every human vision sees the divine truth in a human way. In that sense, one does not see anything but one’s own truth. Yet, in another sense, this is also the divine truth in as far as there can be nothing but truth in the divine truth. Otherness and difference however, only belong to the image and to human vision. With regard to God Himself, human vision can be nothing but the vision of God³⁰. One knows, however, that this seeing of God is only seeing one’s own truth. Because of this, a person knows that what he or she comprehends by seeing is only comprehended because he or she is seen. Therefore, it is a way of comprehending the incomprehensible. The completion of the relation to God in the person seen by God is what Balthasar points out as the introduction of the Pauline idea by Cusanus (Gal. 4,9; 1 Cor. 8,3; 2 Cor 5,11; Phil. 3,12)³¹. Human beings regard themselves as being an image and they know that as such they are not the truth, but are created by God, Who is Truth itself. The truth of being human is nothing more and nothing less than the truth of being an image of Truth itself.

²⁸ *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 577.

²⁹ “Man sieht.....daß Gottes reine Hingegebenheit erst aufgenommen sein wird, wenn auch der Mensch sich frei- personal zu Gott ent-schlossen haben wird, in einer Wahl zugleich Gottes und seiner selbst.” *Herrlichkeit III,1,2*, 578.

³⁰ “Omnis igitur facies, quae in tuam potest intueri faciem nihil videt aliud aut diversum a se, quia videt veritatem suam. Veritas autem exemplaris non potest esse alia aut diversa, sed illa accidunt imagini, ex eo, quia non est ipsum exemplar.” *De visione Dei VI, PTS III*, 112.

³¹ *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 578.

4.2 Created in the image of the possibility to be

In *De Possest* (1460), Cusanus emphasises that God's Being and his infinite potential Being coincide. According to Balthasar, the difference with Thomas' *distinctio realis* is that the possibility of the human-made image of God is clarified by means of an identity of God as *actus purus* and the idea of otherness. Since worldly being does not coincide with possible being, there must be a position where being and possibility coincide. This is God's position. Therefore, the creation of an image of God is an act by the created, which, although it is founded on the act of creation of the Creator, is infinitely different from it. However, according to Balthasar, Cusanus also departs from the tradition of negative theology, because the creation appears as the positive intention of the Creator. This appearance is founded on seeing - which is not the same as having a comprehensive view of - the infinite possibilities of the human mind.

Otherness can only be thought of because of the distinction between possibility and impossibility, which can be made based on the image in which being and potential being coincide. The wherefore of things in themselves can never be constituted by the creature. The essence of the otherness of something is always formulated in the sense of being non-other than what it is. A creature can never answer why something is nothing but that which it is. If this were possible, the creature would become creator. Balthasar identifies this as the point in Cusanus' philosophy where the real problems arise. He acknowledges, however, that Cusanus wants to maintain a classical metaphysical position with the analogy of being as its central idea, without ignoring the biblical-Christian body of thought.

The problem of the Creator-creature points back to the idea of Thomas, who regarded creation both as *emanatio* and as *receptio*, Balthasar argues. 'Emanation' is the classical aspect of the analogy of being, looking at creation as the emanation of the fullness of being of God. 'Reception' is the Christian aspect of the analogy of being, in as far as people's free act of receiving corresponds to the free Potential Being of God. The potential only reveals itself in being in as far as the ability to see this revelation corresponds to the infinite being, without this infinite being being totally enclosed in the ability to see infinite possibilities. In the idea of emanation,

God is dependent upon Himself. In the idea of reception, God's infinite Love, without which there could be no Love, is responded to³².

According to Balthasar, Cusanus' concept of *possesse*³³ is more than the simplicity of being. It is the concept of being infinitely predominated by itself and therefore the openness of the totality of being, wherein God even without Himself can be Himself. In this respect, Cusanus differs from Plato and Plotinus, who raised the idea of the Good above that of Being, to be able to understand why Being should be understood as manifestation. Furthermore, Cusanus differs from Eckhart, who thinks God is Being because He is Spirit and Freedom. He even assimilates and adapts the Anselmian '*id quo maius cogitari*'. The vision of the human mind gets its final positive confirmation vis-à-vis God's incomprehensibility: not just founded on the intangibility of His infinite greatness, but also on the glory of His Love and Majesty³⁴.

According to Balthasar, Cusanus' position not only differs from negative theology, but also from positive theology³⁵. If Cusanus regards human desire to behold the divine glory as an intellectual transcendental possibility, there is a greater intimacy of the human desire and divine self-revelation in his works than in those of the Fathers. Cusanus uses the classical scheme of the dynamics of divine Eros, because the dynamics of human reason cannot be recovered in the world. In Cusanus' works, however, this idea never veers into an

³² *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 580.

³³ Best translated by 'the possibility to be' or even better: 'the freedom to be'.

³⁴ "Collige igitur haec, ut videas omnia ad hoc ordinata, ut mens ad posse ipsum quod videt a remotis, currere possit et incomprehensibile meliori quo potest modo comprehendat, quia posse ipsum est solum potens, cum apparuerit in gloria maiestatis satiare mentis desiderium." *De apice theoriae*, PTS II, 372.

³⁵ *De Deo abscondito*, PTS I, 299-309. This dialogue between a Christian and an heretic is about the absence of God, but does not emphasise a negative theology: "Christian: I know, that everything I know is not God, and that everything I imagine is not like Him, but that He is beyond everything. Heretic: So, nothing is God. C: He is not nothing, because this nothing has a name: nothing. H: If He is not nothing, than He must be something. C: Neither is He something. After all, something is not everything. God, on the other hand, is not rather something than that He is everything. H: It is amazing what you are claiming about the God you worship: That He is neither nothing, nor something. It is incomprehensible. C: Well, God is beyond nothing and beyond something. After all, nothing obeys Him to become something. And therein consists His omnipotence, by which He is beyond everything that is or is not, so that everything that is or is not obeys Him. He is nothing of everything that is below Him; He is nothing of everything that He in His omnipotence precedes. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that He is rather this than that. After all, everything originates from Him." PTS I, 303. (Transl. SvE).

attitude of indifference and resignation like that of the metaphysics of the saints. The desire is maintained, despite the realisation of imperfection. However, human desire is only possible thanks to divine grace, which is God's personal self-revelation in the world. This is where classical thought effortlessly changes into Christian doctrine, Balthasar remarks. The distinction between philosophy and theology of scholastic thought is cancelled in favour of a classical metaphysics of totality. However, this entails the danger of a mystical rationalism in the end, according to Balthasar. He argues that Christology should be reintroduced in its Originian form: Christ will have to be regarded as the presence of the absolute Intellect in the creaturely intellect. Thus, faith is enlightened from within to achieve a better understanding of the mystery of God, "*als Sonne der Geister*"³⁶.

5 Balthasar's primacy of catalogical vision

I have shown Balthasar's discussion of Cusanus' thought in two parts, philosophically and theologically. According to Balthasar, Cusanus has succeeded in developing modern impulses in philosophy. Yet, he has also assimilated elements of classical philosophy. Central to Balthasar's aesthetical approach of Cusanus is the relation between God and humans. He argues that this relation is best expressed in the analogy of being. According to him, Cusanus has found the exact character of analogy: a similarity in the face of an even greater dissimilarity.

What is most characteristic about the idea of analogy in the works of Cusanus is the fact that it is borne by the freedom of both God and humans. Therefore, human freedom should not be characterised by resignation (*Interesselosigkeit*) or by being cast (*Geworfenheit*) alone, but also by longing. In Cusanus' philosophy, the longing for God is expressed in the human intellect, which is capable of comprehending who God is in an incomprehensible way. God is comprehended as the coincidence of opposites, as an identity, without being able to lift the differences of thought itself. Balthasar, acknowledging the importance of Cusanus in the history of Western thought, also warns against the danger of Cusanus' phi-

³⁶ *Herrlichkeit III,1*, 583.

losophy, which, too hastily emphasises the identity of human and divine freedom, forgetting that human freedom should be regarded as being subject to the norm of difference and imperfection.

Nevertheless, Balthasar is of the opinion that Cusanus has succeeded in gauging the value of identity and difference in the relation between God and humans because of his use of the aesthetical category of vision. Cusanus succeeds in doing so, because he does not interpret the appearance of God in the world as a mere innerworldly event. However, he does read it from the innerworldly appearances and forms. The horizontal aesthetics is thus founded in a vertical aesthetics. Cusanus characterises human freedom by its unlimited possibilities, but this limitlessness is also a human inability. For he can never carry out all of these possibilities, let alone oversee them all in one glance or consider them in one thought. Seeing God always remains a longing for God. This constitutes the difference between God and humans and the paradox of the analogy of being: One can only see otherness in the world, and only sees this otherness as otherness because one knows that God sees the otherness as nothing but that which it is. The seeing of God should therefore be thought of as a seeing of non-otherness in the otherness.

The theme of the relation between human and divine freedom is worked out further in Cusanus' theological aesthetics. According to Balthasar, Cusanus does more than stressing the difference between God and humans and the inadequacy of the human intellect to know God in a way similar to that of Plotinus or the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. He also approaches it in a biblical way. The selflessness with which God sees the world and through which one can see the divine glory in the world, can only be understood within the framework of the love of God, which is even more incomprehensible than His selflessness. Cusanus sees human freedom as a gift out of love. Thus, he conquers negative theology. Human beings are capable of a positive confirmation of the love of God despite the inadequacy of their vision of God. According to Balthasar, Cusanus' philosophy is completed in the idea of potential being. It regards human freedom as both emanation and reception. A creature has been given an indefinite number of possible ways of answering the love of God. According to Balthasar, this positive statement fulfils the idea of a biblical interpretation of the analogy of being in a modern philosophical framework.

The intelligibility of the world is founded in its infinite possibility. The vision of God is a precondition for seeing the world. However, according to Balthasar, Cusanus is shifting the whole perspective of theology at this point. Whereas Neoplatonic philosophy used to ascend from affirmations to negations analogously, Cusanus offers us the perspective from the incomprehensible God to an expression in the world in a catalogical descending movement³⁷. However, this catalogical perspective is assumed in every analogical movement, but in itself, it is infinitely unapproachable. In other words: Although faith is the condition of meaning and understanding, this insight cannot be explained otherwise than by understanding itself. Only within this complex structure of the interwovenness of the catalogical and analogical movement, it is understandable that in the Son the Father can be seen (John 14,9). The human nature of Jesus subsists in his divine personhood, so that nature itself will be encompassed in this unity of divinity and humanity³⁸. This unity finds its climax in the cross, where the coincidence of opposites, the coincidence of catalog and analogy, is fulfilled by Christ, because He descends in utmost humility, without losing His divinity³⁹.

6 Conclusion

Balthasar's main question in his reading of Cusanus is: What is the importance of the analogy of the human vision of God and God's vision of human beings for theology. Can the unity and the difference of divine vision (the catalogical movement) and being an image (the analogical movement) provide a solution for the problem of analogy? Again, the question arises: How can there be a world apart from God, when God is all in all?

Let us have one final glance at Cusanus' example of the portrait to explain the theme of analogy in Balthasar's aesthetics. First, Nicholas shows us that people have images of reality, which they realise, are not reality itself, but only images of it. Seeing and being

³⁷H.U. von Balthasar, *Theologik II, Bd. II. Wahrheit Gottes*, Einsiedeln 1985, 195.

³⁸*De visione Dei* 19, PTS III, "To me, a humble person, You reveal, my God, such a hidden mystery, that I can understand that humans can't understand You, Father, unless through and in your Son, Who is comprehensible and intermediary. And now I understand that to comprehend You is to become one with You. Humans can become one with You, through your Son, Who is the medium of unification." (Transl. SvE)

³⁹H.U. von Balthasar, *Theologik II*, 194.

seen, although separate in human images, are associated. From this follows the insight that it is no use regarding reality as something completely different from that, which is represented in it. It is for the sake of this unrepresentable reality that this image is formed. Conversely, the reality that cannot be represented, can only be thought of thanks to the image; it cannot be thought of independently of the image. Finally, we can conclude that the creation of images is a constitutive element of being human and his relation to the reality surrounding him. This human constitutive act is a limited, yet transcendental method of relating to reality as a whole, and to God in particular. The creation of an image always only actualises but one of the many possible configurations of identity and difference. In this way, one also appears to oneself as an image and therefore as a limit. It is this observation that makes one susceptible to the reality *in* images and the possibilities that appear in these images.

Limit and difference are the constructive elements of every act of imagination, and therefore of faith and theology as well. They serve not to point to whatever lies outside the limits of the image. Nor do they serve to ascertain that humans are trapped in their own images from which they will never be able to reach reality. To a certain extent, image and reality are inextricably intertwined. Reality is the limit of the image during the creation of the image, because image and reality never fully coincide. The creation of an image is the actualisation of one of the many possibilities of imagined reality. This is how it presents that reality. However, this reality can only be thought of within the image that actualises it. Therefore, the image is both limit and possibility of the susceptibility to that reality.

For human beings, seeing precedes the statement of being, because the practice of seeing is a coincidence of seeing and being seen. With every perception, humans form the image they have of reality and therefore of themselves. Typical of the human situation is that they can go on forever questioning the limits of the image in which they live, if they want to. According to Cusanus, this fundamental infinity is God's freedom, which is at the same time the limit of human imagination and the human image. The freedom is the limit of the image, and one cannot be that freedom itself, but is constituted by it. God *is* freedom and humans *have* freedom. This freedom is the creativity of human imagination, the ability to keep

confronting images with each other and by doing so, creating a new image of oneself and the surrounding reality.

To be able to actualise this human freedom, humans have to be forever different from the reality that confronts them in images, and the images they create of reality. This is why being is never fully constituted by the act of seeing. The fact that human beings are forever different from the images they behold is the tension with which they have to live. This tension is the context of human longing for a potential, which seems to be forever inaccessible. This inaccessibility should not, however, be characterised by failure and inability, but by infinite possibility. This infinite possibility is not some distant ideal that is way beyond the limits of this life. It is a reality that humans are constantly confronted with and which constantly emanates from him.

Humans are not simply passive and resigned towards this confronting reality. They meet it repeatedly and actualise it by means of the image. The image is the presence of the ever-newly created reality. As such, human imagination is not regulated by the ever-failing longing for the one or the whole. It is regulated by the desire to look in the same direction as the image. This direction diverges into all directions, however. It diverges into many perspectives of that one reality, which can only spread itself like the gamut of visions. In doing so, it also draws all these visions to itself.